

Find Golgatha

Atop the back of a great behemoth, floating on its inexorable journey to no destination, is a great city. It exists as a place for lost souls to find a home, free of the bonds of their past lives. The creature who plays uncaring host to this metropolis, takes little notice of those who live atop its back. Countless generations have lived and died atop its shell but it matters little, after all do we notice the ants as they crawl save when they become an annoyance.

It was in the distant past that the city was founded. Long after the fall of Illyria and the dark times that followed. The more advanced Species of the greater spiral knew there was a need for a place no one species had claim to. No planet or asteroid where blood had been shed in honor of king or greed for coin. So came the decision to build atop the behemoths shell. It had long been known to space fairers. Its concentric path through the greater spiral took a dozen times a dozen lifetimes but it had been measured and followed. It took many years, and many lost lives to build the first foundations of what would become the great city of behemoth. At first, it was but a single spire, a thousand feet tall and glistening silver in the starlight. Over the generations, it became home to the homeless and disenfranchised, as world's died to natural disaster and war, the survivors limped to behemoth and the city grew vast. and that first glistening spire became many. They named themselves the free and the unwanted and the Behemoth was respected as a place for all and home to all.

All who are lost and hopeless eventually find themselves here, either to escape or to find answers. Ander hoped he would find what he was seeking here. He watched out the porthole of the small transport he'd managed to bribe his way onto as the hulking massive shape of the creature grew larger in the distance. It looked akin to the snapping turtles of Earth. The transport was cramped and smelled of sewage, Ander was sitting on a crate of live seafood containing a creature the size of a small dog. It looked hungry, he tried not to think too hard about what it likely wanted to eat.

Ander had been on the run for months. Ever since he was framed for a murder he didn't commit. He would never have believed it was possible, not in this civilized age, to be framed. Ander was Earthborn, and with that came all the privilege and station of living in the heart of the UESC. he had never wanted for anything, his health was maintained by nanobot injections he had received at birth. He lived a comfortable life as a data processor and went home every night to a partner he loved. He never thought it was possible to become a fugitive, that fate was supposed to be relegated to the inhabitants of rimworlds. When every moment of your entire life has run like clockwork, it was hard to comprehend the idea of an error. After long enough it was easy to live your life as a cog in the great machine of earth, Ander had been a good cog. His job wasn't pretty, or glamorous, he filed records for the UESC. he found himself wishing he had been a better cog, If he hadn't looked closer, if he hadn't asked so many questions, maybe Sofia would still be alive.

Ander was broken from his train of thoughts by the transport docking with one of the spires of behemoth. The hiss of the ship equalizing with the port tower was accompanied by the taste of stale recycled air and the smell of space still lingering in the airlock. Like brimstone, or gunpowder. The smell hit Ander already mixing with the smells of exotic spices and unwashed

mass of sentience lingering beyond the portal, Ander tried not to gag at the intensity of it all. He found himself missing the carefully maintained air of Earth, after the Polin blight oxygen scrubbers were created to maintain the ideal air quality. Every breath of carefully maintained air was as perfect and noticeably clean as the previous. Everything here was so, unclean.

"Welcome to the port of lost souls Earther," says the pilot looking him over with a smirk. The man was missing his front teeth and he had a disturbing habit of darting his tongue into the gap they left when he smiled. Why didn't the man replace them? It wasn't that hard to replace lost teeth. Was it really that destitute outside the core?

"Thank you, you'll find the credits are already in your account," says Ander swiping his fingers over the display of a small datapad initiating the transfer. He could see the man eyeing the device like it was a foreign luxury he had never seen before. It was already 3 months out of date, last year Ander would have been embarrassed to be seen with it. Now he clung to it like the lifeline it was.

Disembarking from the transport Ander is hit by the sight of the spaceport. It was unlike anything he had ever seen. Earth was still almost entirely populated by humans, the few exospecies that were in residence were usually diplomats and rarely seen outside their respective embassies. Even Mars was downright blasé in comparison to the miasma of beings from every corner of the known universe that fill the space before him. It resembled an open-air bazaar with a low ceiling holding in the smells and sounds, amplifying its intensity, it was awe-inspiring and nauseating all at once. Ander falls into the flow of bodies pushing inward toward the central hub of the spire level. The walls were covered in colorful script of a dozen languages Ander didn't recognize, but he could follow the arrows. The push of the crowd is so forceful that Ander is whisked by dozens of stalls selling food and wears his feet barely touching the floor. Some looked mouth watering and some he knew would kill him instantly. Ander had never seen such diversity before. He wound his way through the crowd until he could finally force his way free into a small dimly lit corridor. It leads to a bar front its flashing neon sign burned his retinas as he took it in. the Spacers Last Rest. there was a crudely painted mural of a human in a space suit floating in vacuum, there is a serene expression on his face. The bar rundown and battered, it looked like oldtown on mars, where he had managed to bribe his way aboard the toothless spacer's cargo ship.

Ander entered the bar, heading for the bartop that stretched across the back of the room. It was small and smelled like stale beer and Kryonian yak milk, god that stuff smelled disgusting. The woman behind the bar was gorgeous, her dark blue skin glowed in the red neon of the bar. She was wiping down the steel bartop humming to herself. Looking up at Ander as he neared her she smiled.

"Here for a drink love?" Ander blushes under her look.

"Sure, nothing too hard it's been a long trip" Ander replied. Taking a seat at the bar he lets his pack hit the ground with a thump. Funny how everything he owned could fit in a single bag now. "And what would bring a nice boy like you to a place like Behemoth?" she asked as she poured him a glass of clear blue liquid and slid it across the bar. Nervously Ander takes the glass and sniffs it before taking a sip. It smelled like flowers but burned like lighter fluid as he swallows it. Coughing like he might lose a lung Ander leaves the glass on the table. Trying to ignore the bartender's chuckling he adjusts his jacket.

"I've heard Bohemyth is a place to find things. People more specifically"

"Such things are possible here," she says her smile slipping away, she almost sounded disappointed.

"Where do you go to find information about someone?"

"That isn't such a simple thing. You can find anything on Behemoth. But it always comes at a price, and never a cheap one. This place was built on the notion of freedom, and many choose to take advantage of that fact."

"I need to find a man, I've tried everything in my power but he's like a ghost. No price is too steep." the bartender sighs tossing the bar towel over her shoulder. She leans back crossing her arms, seeming to consider Ander for a moment.

"You should be more careful about sharing things like that. Tell me, is this the first place you came? Have you been walking up to every bartender in the sector acting a fool like this?"

Ander blushes playing with the glass of vile liquid she gave him.

"This was my first stop. I just got here"

"Why my bar? There are others."

"This was the first one I saw."

"Fate perhaps. Give me your hand boy" she says holding out her hand. Hesitantly Ander reaches out his hand. She grabs it firmly and closes her large iridescent eyes.

"Soft hands for a human this far from the Earth, a bureaucrat? Yes, you never did work very hard. This is the furthest you've ever been from home isn't it."

Ander tries to say something in his own defense but a look from the bartender silences his voice in his throat.

"You've suffered a great loss, a lover. She was beautiful. This man you seek, he took her from you, killed her."

"How do you know all this?" Ander's voice his dry and horse.

"My kind have their gift or curse depending on your point of view. You seek this man out of revenge. I can tell you where you may find information about the 'Crowley?' yes that's his name, isn't it."

"Yes it is," says Ander his voice barely more than a whisper.

"You should not go. This is a dark perhaps even evil path you tread boy, and very soon you will have to decide how far you are willing to go. If you let it vengeance will turn you into a cold twisted version of yourself."

"It doesn't matter, he has to pay" Anders voice is hard, tinged with a sadness the bartender has heard too many times.

"Find Golgatha then, we all know where to find him but most know not to. He is in the bowels of this sector. He is hard to miss and harder to escape if he notices you. Golgatha will know where this man is if you're willing to pay the price. And I warn you, the price will be terrible." with that she drops his hand. Reaching into her pocket she hands Ander a small slip of paper.

"If you change your mind find me, maybe I can give you a different path."

"Thank you," says Ander taking the paper absently and thrusting it into his pocket. Grabbing his pack from the ground he leaves a few credit coins on the table to cover his drink. He pauses for a moment.

"And it's Ander, my name."

"I Wish you well Ander, you are innocent, but you won't be much longer." Ander debates asking the girl her name, but the moment passes. He leaves the bar with a heavy feeling in his heart.

She hadn't lied, it was easy to find Golgatha. It took less than an hour and a few questions for Ander to find his way to a grim covered door in the dimly light ill kept lower levels of Bohemyth. . Ander tried not to let himself think of what the darker stains might be, the stench of the lower levels was disturbing enough.

Steeling himself against what was to come, Ander knocked on the doorway.

It opens a moment later to reveal a hulking creature that looked like a troll. Its squished purple face was frozen in a permanent grimace that implied possible violence with little provocation. It looked him up and down for a moment.

"What you want Earther?" he asks in a voice like silverware in a garbage disposal.

"I'm here to see Golgatha," says Ander trying to draw himself up to his full height and remain calm despite the adrenaline coursing through his system.

"Hurmph" replies the troll before stepping aside to let Ander into the dark space behind him. before letting him into the room.

"who would have guessed, not like this is his place of business or anything," says the Troll in a deeply sarcastic voice.

"Um, is he here?"

"He's always here. Go through there, he's been waiting for you." the troll pointed to another door behind him. Gulping Ander continues onward. A black dread has taken hold of his gut, this didn't feel right. The stench inside the "office" was horrendous, like putrid flesh and disease so thick he could almost taste it.

The door opened to an even darker room, it reeked of bile and waste, Ander gaged at the stench of it.

"Is that any way to greet me before asking for favors boy? Asked a flemmy voice from the darkness. Ander's eyes were beginning to adjust to the low light, he sees that a great hulking mass is taking up the greater part of the room. It is a great mass of flesh and open sores, and at its center is a face that will probably haunt his darkest dreams. Lidless eyes stare at him unblinking and glazed white from lack of light, it's mouth is more akin to a gash, like an open wound gaping for air in the putrid stench of the room.

"Sorry, I was just surprised was all," said Ander trying to bite back his gag reflex.

"Humans, no sense of a pleasing bouquet at all. Well, why have you come boy? I've never had one look for me so loudly or gracelessly, I must admit it peaked my curiosity, perhaps you're with the authority seeking to do away with my business, this wouldn't be the first time, however, they are usually more tactful in their approach. Perhaps you are genuine. Either way, I haven't decided if I will kill you or help you. Be convincing boy!"

"I was told you can find People. I want to find a man named Crowley"

"How delightfully pedestrian" replied the creature with a mirthful laugh.

"I need to find him."

"But of course you do. But why should I help you? Out of the goodness of my hearts?"

"I can pay you," said Ander in desperation.

"Ha, I have little use for credits. No, I trade in favors. Yes, perhaps you could do. Tell me boy how much do you want this Crowley?"

"I will do anything," said Ander, the words slip past his lips before he even thinks. Ander immediately realizes it was a mistake.

"Yessssssss, I like to hear that. Well, I can find him for you, I can even tell you who hired him to kill your girl, Sofia wasn't it?"

"How did you?"

"I know things boy that's what I do. Now if you are willing to do a favor for me then I can give you everything you want."

"Tell me what you want."

"Quite simply, I need you to kill someone for me."

"What?"

"Did I stutter? I want you to kill someone for me" the creatures' voice was growing annoyed.

"How?"

"Oh a plasma cap to the brain should do, look in the box on the desk over there," said Golgatha gesturing with a limp appendage that looked vaguely like a hand.

Turning around Ander found the box with a little fumbling. He opens it to find a manila folder and a small gun.

"The photo is of a woman who has been causing harm to my business of late. A do-gooder I believe is the earth term, Annoying at best dangerous at worst. Kill her, don't get caught, and all you want to know will be yours." Ander opens the folder to find a familiar face. The bartender, she is smiling in the picture. The folder had a thin file detailing her daily routine, and her name. Jasmin, an Earth name, Strange.

He had to do this, it was the only way. But how could he? What would Sofia say if she knew? This would betray everything she ever cared about. She helped people, always.

"Do we have a deal boy?"

"No, no we don't," says Ander dropping the file.

"It's very unfortunate to hear that," says Golgatha with a sigh. Out of the corner of his eye, Ander sees the troll enter the room. The hulk is carrying a large gun.

"I don't want any trouble with you Golgatha," said Ander knowing it was already too late.

That's too bad, you see she will die regardless of your involvement, It would be easier if it was an unknown quantity, like a new Earther fresh to the spire, to remove this thorn from my proverbial paw. But I suppose we will simply dispose of two bodies instead of one " Golgatha's words are acrid and reeking of pride.

Looking down at the box Ander considers his situation. He'd done this all wrong, he was quite simply screwed now. He could kill the bartender, or he could die. Simple choice really, especially considering he had everything to gain. Or he could take the third option.

Ander had done one thing right since going on the run. He had tracked down a gene splicer on Mars who had modified his nanites to fool recognition trackers into identifying him as someone else, and he had installed a failsafe protocol. It was single use, and dangerous. With a deep

breath Ander bites down on his left rear molar triggering a small forcefield pulse it rattles Anders' bones and the concussion blows out his eardrums leaving his head ringing.

The troll is thrown back and Golgatha screams as he is pushed back against the wall.

Ander takes a plasma charge to the shoulder, the troll firing wildly as he is thrown back. He screams in agony even as the nanobots in his blood speed the healing process and temporarily lances his nerve endings. The troll It thuds to the ground choking. Ande can feel sweat pouring down his face, his heart was pounding in his ears making the pain of the ringing worse. He could barely hear Golgatha shouting orders to unseen men. Getting to his feet Ander tries to walk over to the troll. Dust is falling from the ceiling. Dazed Ander looks up in time to see the weakened supports of the ceiling give way, steel folds and tears as the level above fall into the dank room. Darkness envelops Ander as he is buried under the falling debris. He can feel the darkness closing in as a final thought crosses his mind. Jasmin was right.

